

SECTARIANISM.

It is the Cause of Much Trouble in the Church of Christ.

Rev. Dr. Talmage Calls It Bigotry and Intolerance and Says It is Often the Child of Ignorance—The Difference Between Many Sects Trifling and Unimportant.

In the following sermon Dr. Talmage shows how the different religious denominations originated and what he thinks ought to be the attitude of the church in dealing with them. The text is Judges 12: 6: "Then said they unto him, Say now Shibboleth, and he said Shibboleth; for he could not frame to pronounce it right. Then they took him and slew him at the passages of Jordan."

Do you notice the difference of pronunciation between shibboleth and sibboleth? A very small and unimportant difference, you say. And yet, that difference was the difference between life and death for a great many people. The Lord's people, Gilead and Ephraim, got into a great fight, and Ephraim was worsted, and on the retreat came to the fords of the river Jordan to cross. Order was given that all Ephraimites coming there be slain. But how could it be found out who were Ephraimites? They were detected by their pronunciation. Shibboleth was a word that stood for their own, and when they tried to say "shibboleth" always left out the sound of the "h." When it was asked that they say shibboleth they said sibboleth, and were slain. "Then said they unto him, say now shibboleth; and he said sibboleth, for he could not frame to pronounce it right. Then they took him and slew him at the passages of Jordan." A very small difference, you say, between Gilead and Ephraim, and yet how much intolerance about that small difference! The Lord's tribes in our time—by which I mean the different denominations of Christians—sometimes magnify a very small difference, and the only difference between scores of denominations to-day is the difference between shibboleth and sibboleth.

The church of God is divided into a great number of denominations. Time would fail me to tell of the Calvinists, and the Arminians, and the Sabatarians, and the Baxterians, and the Duncans, and the Shakers, and the Quakers, and the Methodists, and the Baptists, and the Episcopalians, and the Lutherans, and the Congregationalists, and the Presbyterians, and the Spiritualists, and a score of other denominations of religionists, some of them founded by very good men, some of them founded by very egotistic men, some of them founded by very bad men. But as I demand for myself liberty of conscience, I must give that same liberty to every other man, remembering that he no more differs from me than I differ from him. I advocate the largest liberty in all religious belief and form of worship.

You know that the air and the water keep pure by constant circulation, and I think there is a tendency in religious discussion to purification and moral health. Between the fourth and the sixteenth centuries the church proposed to make people think aright by prohibiting discussion, and by strong censorship of the press, and rack, and gibbet, and not lead down the threat, tried to make people orthodox; but it was discovered that you cannot change a man's belief by twisting off his head, nor make a man see differently by putting an awl through his eyes. There is something in a man's conscience which will hurl off the mountain that you threw upon it, and, unsunged of the fire, out of the flame will make red wings on which the martyr will mount to glory.

In that time of which I speak, between the fourth and sixteenth centuries, people went from the house of God into the most appalling iniquity, and right along by consecrated altars there were tides of drunkenness and licentiousness such as the world never heard of, and the very sewers of perdition broke loose and flooded the church. After awhile the printing press was freed, and it broke the shackles of the human mind. Then there came a large number of bad books, and where there was one man hostile to the Christian religion, there were twenty men ready to advocate it; so I have not any nervousness in regard to this battle going on between Truth and Error. The Truth will conquer just as certainly as that God is stronger than the devil. Let Error run if you only let Truth run along with it. Urged on by skeptic's shout and transcendentalist's spur, let it run. God's angels of wrath are in hot pursuit, and quicker than eagle's beak clutches out a hawk's heart. God's vengeance will fear it to pieces.

I propose to speak to you of sectarianism—its origin, its evils, and its cures. There are those who would make us think that this monster, with horns and hoofs, is religion. I shall chase it to its hiding-place, and drag it out of the caverns of darkness, and rip off its hide. But I want to make a distinction between bigotry and the lawful fondness for peculiar religious beliefs and forms of worship. I have no admiration for a nothingarian.

A style of psalmody that may please me may displease you. Some would like to have a minister in gown and bands and surplice, and others prefer to have a minister in plain citizen's apparel. Some are most impressed when a little child is presented at the altar and sprinkled of the waters of a holy benediction "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost," and others are more impressed when the penitent comes up out of the river, his garments dripping with the waters of a baptism which signifies the washing away of sin. Let either have his own way. One man likes no noise in prayer, not a word, not a whisper. Another man, just as good, prefers by gesticulation and exclamation to express his

devotional aspirations. One is just as good as the other. "Every man fully persuaded in his own mind."

George Whitefield was going over a Quaker rather roughly for some of his religious sentiments, and the Quaker said: "George, I am as thou art; I am for bringing all men to the hope of the gospel; therefore, if thou wilt not quarrel with me about my broad brim, I will not quarrel with thee about thy black gown. George, give me thy hand."

In tracing out the religion of sectarianism, or bigotry, I find that a great deal of it comes from wrong education in the home circle. There are parents who do not think it wrong to caricature and jeer the peculiar forms of religion in the world, and denounce other sects and other denominations. It is very often the case that that kind of education acts just opposite to what was expected, and the children grow up, and, after awhile, go and see for themselves; and, looking in those churches, and finding that the people are good there, and they love God and keep his commandments, by natural reaction they go and join those very churches. I could mention the names of prominent ministers of the gospel who spent their whole lives bombarding other denomination and who lived to see their children preach the gospel in those very denominations. But it is often the case that bigotry starts in a household, and that the subject of it never recovers. There are tens of thousands of bigots ten years old.

Bigotry is often the child of ignorance. You seldom find a man with large intellect who is a bigot. It is the man who thinks he knows a great deal, but does not. That man is almost always a bigot. The whole tendency of education and civilization is to bring a man out of that kind of state of mind and heart.

Look out for the man who sees only one side of a religious truth. Look out for the man who never walks around about these great theories of God and eternity and the dead. He will be a bigot inevitably—the man who only sees one side. There is no man more to be pitied than he who has in his head just one idea—no more, no less. More light, less sectarianism. There is nothing that will soon kill bigotry as sunshine—God's sunshine.

So I have set before you what I consider to be the causes of bigotry. I have set before you the origin of this great evil. What are some of the baleful effects? First of all, it cripples investigation. You are wrong, and I am right, and that ends it. No taste for exploration, no spirit of God's truth, over which an archangel might fly from eternity to eternity and not reach the limit, the man shuts himself out and dies, a blind mole under a corn shock. It stops all investigation.

While each denomination of Christians is to present all the truths of the Bible, it seems to me that God has given to each denomination an especial mission to give particular emphasis to some one doctrine; and so the Calvinistic churches must present the sovereignty of God, and the Arminian churches must present man's free agency, and the Episcopal churches must present the importance of order and solemn ceremony, and the Baptist churches must present the necessity of ordinances, and the Congregational churches must present the responsibility of the individual member, and the Methodist church must show what holy enthusiasm, hearty congregational singing can accomplish. While each denomination of Christians must set forth all the doctrines of the Bible, I feel it is especially incumbent upon each denomination to put particular emphasis on some one doctrine.

Another great damage done by the sectarianism and bigotry of the church, is that it disgusts people with the Christian religion. Now, my friends, the church of God was never intended for a war barracks. People are afraid of a riot. You go down the street, and you see an excitement, and missiles flying through the air, and you hear the shock of firearms. Do you, the peaceful and industrious citizen, go through that street? Oh, no! you will say, "I'll go around the block." Now, men come and look upon this narrow path to Heaven, and sometimes see the ecclesiastical brickbats flying every whither, and they say, "Well, I guess I'll take the broad road; there is so much sharp-shooting on the narrow road, I guess I'll try the broad road!"

Again, bigotry and sectarianism do great damage in the fact that they hinder the triumph of the gospel. Oh, how much wasteful ammunition! How many men of splendid intellect have given their whole life to controversial disputes when, if they had given their life to something practical, they might have been vastly useful! Suppose, while I speak, there were a common enemy coming up the bay, and all the forts around the harbor began to fire into each other—you would cry out, "National suicide! Why don't those forts blaze away in one direction, and that against the common enemy?" And yet I sometimes see in the church of the Lord Jesus Christ a strange thing going on; church against church, minister against minister, denomination against denomination, firing away into their own fort, or the fort which ought to be on the same side, instead of concentrating their energy and giving one mighty and everlasting volley against the navies of darkness riding up through the bay!

I go out sometimes in the summer, and I find two beehives, and these two hives are in a quarrel. I come near enough not to be stung, but I come just near enough to hear the controversy, and one beehive says, "That field of clover is the sweetest," and another says, "That field of clover is the sweetest." I come in between them and I say, "Stop this quarrel; if you like that field of clover best, go there; if you like this field of clover best, go there; but let me tell you that that hive which gets the most honey is the best hive!" So I come out between the churches of the Lord Jesus Christ. One denomination of

Christians says, "That field of Christian doctrine is best," and another says, "This field of Christian doctrine is the best." Well, I say, "go where you get the most honey." That is the best church which gets the most honey of Christian grace for the heart, and the most honey of Christian usefulness for the life.

Besides that, if you want to build up any denomination, you will never build it up by trying to pull some other down. Intolerance never put anything down. How much has intolerance accomplished, for instance, against the Methodist church? For long years her ministry were forbidden the pulpits of Great Britain. Why was it that so many of them preached in the fields? Simply because they could not get in the churches. And the name of the church was given in derision and as a sarcasm. The critics of the church said, "They have no order, they have no method in their worship;" and the critics, therefore, in irony, called them "Methodists."

What did intolerance accomplish against the Baptist church? If laughing scorn and tirade could have destroyed the church it would not have to-day a disciple left. The Baptists were hurled out of Boston in olden times. Those who sympathized with them were imprisoned, and when a petition was offered asking leniency in their behalf, all the men who signed it were indicted. Has tolerance stopped the Baptist church? The last statistics in regard to it showed forty-four thousand churches and four million communicants. Intolerance never put down anything.

Now, here is a great gospel platform. A man comes up on this side of the platform and says: "I don't believe in baby sprinkling." Shall I shove him off? Here is a man coming up on this side of the platform, and he says: "I don't believe in the perseverance of the saints." Shall I shove him off? No. I will say: "Do you believe in the Lord Jesus as your Saviour? Do you trust him for time and for eternity?" He says: "Yes." Do you take Christ for time and for eternity?" "Yes," I say. "Come on, brother; one in time and one in eternity; brother now, brother forever." Blessed be God for a gospel platform so large that all who receive Christ may stand on it!

I think we may overthrow the severe sectarianism and bigotry in our hearts, and in the church also, by realizing that all the denominations of Christians have yielded noble institutions and noble men. There is nothing that so stirs my soul as this thought. One denomination yielded a Robert Hall and an Adoniram Judson; another yielded a Latimer and a Melville; another yielded John Wesley and the blessed Summerfield, while our own denomination yielded John Knox and the Alexanders—men of whom the world was not worthy. Now, I say, if we are honest and fair-minded men, when we come up in the presence of such churches and such denominations, although they may be different from our own, we ought to love and honor them. Churches which can produce such men, and such large-hearted charity, and such magnificent martyrdom, ought to win our affection—at any rate, our respect. So come on, ye six hundred thousand Episcopalians in this country, and ye fourteen hundred thousand Presbyterians, and ye four million Baptists, and ye five million Methodists—come on; shoulder to shoulder we will march for the world's conquest; for all nations are to be saved, and God demands that you and I help. Forward, the whole line! In the Young Men's Christian associations, in the Bible Society, in the Tract Society, in the Foreign Missionary Society, shoulder to shoulder, all denominations.

Perhaps I might forcefully illustrate this truth by calling your attention to an incident which took place twenty-five years ago. One Monday morning, about 2 o'clock, while her nine hundred passengers were sound asleep in her berths dreaming of home, the steamer Atlantic crashed into Mars' Head. Five hundred souls in ten minutes landed in eternity. Oh, what a scene! Agonized men and women running up and down the gangways, and clutching for the rigging, and the plunge of the helpless steamer and the clapping of the hands of the merciless sea, threw two continents into terror. But see the brave quartermaster pushing out with the life line until he gets to the rock, and see these fishermen gathering up the shipwrecked and taking them into the cabins and wrapping them in the flannels snug and warm; and see that minister of the gospel, with three other men, getting into a life boat and pushing out for the wreck, pulling away across the surf, and pulling away until they saved one more man, and then getting back with him to the shore. Can these men ever forget that night? And can they ever forget their companionship in peril, companionship in struggle, companionship in awful catastrophe and rescue? Never! Never! In whatever part of the earth they meet, they will be friends when they mention the story of that night when the Atlantic struck Mars' Head. Well, my friends, our world has gone into a worse shipwreck. Sin drove it on the rocks. The old ship has lurched and tossed on the tempests of six thousand years. Out with the life line. I do not care what denomination carries it. Side by side the members of common hardships, and common trials, and common prayers, and common tears, let us be brothers forever. We must be

One army of the living God. To his command we bow; Part of the host have crossed the flood And part are crossing now.

And I expect to see the day when all denominations of Christians shall join hands around the cross of Christ and recite the creed: "I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ, and in the communion of the saints, and in life everlasting. Amen."

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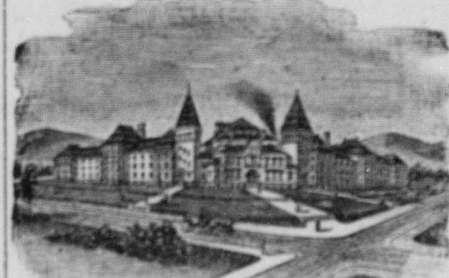
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